Calling Up Literacy
When the phone rings at our house, it also flashes. The flashing light alerts my eleven-year-old daughter, Becca, that the phone is ringing and she answers it. Because Becca is deaf, she places the telephone receiver into a coupler and begins to type her message.

When the phone is for Becca, it is most likely her best friend Lindsay calling to chat or to make plans. Lindsay is also deaf. She and Becca have been friends since preschool.

After my husband and I learned that Becca was deaf, one of the first things we did was purchase a TTY, a special telephone that allows deaf people to type their messages instead of speaking them. We took to heart this quote: “In a culture where written language is prominent and readily available, basic literacy is a natural extension of an individual’s linguistic development, given adequate environmental conditions” (Fillion and Brause, 1989). We knew that deaf children are natural language learners, and we believed that frequent and meaningful use of the TTY would translate into valuable literacy experiences.

We decided to introduce our daughter to the TTY when she was in preschool. We purchased and used our TTY for phone conversations with deaf friends, and kept it in an accessible location in our home. At this age, Becca would observe us and her older sister using the TTY. We would tell her who we were calling and interpret the conversations for her.

When Becca was in preschool, our family moved to the neighborhood where Lindsay’s family lives. Each girl enjoyed having a signing playmate nearby and frequently visited each other’s home.

When the phone is for Becca, it is most likely her best friend Lindsay calling to chat or to make plans. Lindsay is also deaf. She and Becca have been friends since preschool.

After my husband and I learned that Becca was deaf, one of the first things we did was purchase a TTY, a special telephone that allows deaf people to type their messages instead of speaking them. We took to heart this quote: “In a culture where written language is prominent and readily available, basic literacy is a natural extension of an individual’s linguistic development, given adequate environmental conditions” (Fillion and Brause, 1989). We knew that deaf children are natural language learners, and we believed that frequent and meaningful use of the TTY would translate into valuable literacy experiences.

We decided to introduce our daughter to the TTY when she was in preschool. We purchased and used our TTY for phone conversations with deaf friends, and kept it in an accessible location in our home. At this age, Becca would observe us and her older sister using the TTY. We would tell her who we were calling and interpret the conversations for her.

When Becca was in preschool, our family moved to the neighborhood where Lindsay’s family lives. Each girl enjoyed having a signing playmate nearby and frequently visited each other’s home.

During first grade, the girls assumed more responsibility for their phone calls. Their language, spelling, and keyboard skills gradually improved. At age six, Lindsay called from our house to ask her mother for permission to join us at the local swimming pool:

Mom: GRETTA HERE GA
Lindsay: LINDSAY HERE GA
Mom: HI HOW ARE YOU GA
Lindsay: FINE CAN I GO SWIMING (sic) (long pause)
Mom: YOU FORGOT TO SAY GA
Lindsay: GA

Early in their friendship, both sets of parents began to model using the TTY for phone conversations about the girls’ play arrangements. For example, if Lindsay wanted to play with Becca, her mother used the TTY to call our house while Lindsay stood by watching. After answering the phone, we summoned Becca to watch the conversation.

Becca and Lindsay soon expressed interest in using the TTY themselves. They learned how to cradle the telephone receiver on the TTY and to turn it on. Because they could recognize numbers, they were able to dial with assistance from a parent or sibling who signed the correct sequence of numbers.

They frequently asked to “talk” to each other and began to take turns typing back and forth. They learned that the symbol “GA” for “Go Ahead” served as a way to signal the other to take a turn. These conversations looked like this:

Becca: sdkdhtpwewrnsdflksdferewunGA
Lindsay: alkhdfhaweroyuhaefnbdfhsaflba sdjouhgrerawrherfherboherbkjih fjsdlgGAAjskjdsfjkhsdfkjwher nbfnGA

Sometimes one of the girls would take a very long turn and the other would become bored and hang up. Her friend was left happily typing, unaware that the “message” was not being received on the other end until she finally signaled “GA” and received no response.

We tried to provide frequent

By Bonnie M. Neeley

OPPOSITE: Mother and daughter, Rebecca with her mother author Bonnie Neeley on the steps of their home.
own successes and errors.
In kindergarten, as Lindsay and Becca’s emerging literacy skills continued to develop, they began to type and read familiar words during TTY conversations. At first they typed their names at the beginning of the conversation. Then they learned to type “here.” This was an easy word because the “e” and “r” are adjacent on the keyboard. They also learned to hit the spacebar between words. Soon Becca could independently dial Lindsay’s house and upon seeing an answer type, “Becca here GA.”

During each call Becca wanted me to pause and allow her to read for herself what words she could recognize. If I forgot or was unaware that she knew a word, I would be scolded!

During first grade, the girls assumed more responsibility for their phone calls. Their language, spelling, and keyboard skills gradually improved. At age six, Lindsay called from our house to ask her mother for permission to join us at the local swimming pool:

**Mom**: GRETTA HERE GA
**Lindsay**: LINDSAY HERE GA
**Mom**: HOW ARE YOU GA
**Lindsay**: FINE CAN I GO SWIMING(sic)(long pause)
**Mom**: YOU FORGOT TO SAY GA
**Lindsay**: GA
**Mom**: I THINK IT WILL BE FUN FOR YOU TO SWIM YES YOU CAN GO WHO WILL GO WITH YOU Q GA
**Lindsay**: REBECCA
**Mom**: WHO WILL DRIVE YOU Q GA
**Lindsay**: CHUCK GA
**Mom**: THAT IS FINE YOU NEED TO GET YOUR PLUG FOR YOUR EAR GA
**Lindsay**: YES

As Becca and Lindsay gained more skills, our involvement in their conversations dwindled to occasionally spelling or reading an unknown word.

By third grade, Becca began to use the relay service to phone her hearing friend, Willie. Relay services, now the law in the United States, allow a deaf person to call another caller who does not have a TTY by using an operator as an intermediary.

Willie had a habit of beginning most sentences with “Wulp” as in: “Wulp, you can’t come over now ‘cause I’m bare naked.” The relay operator typed everything Willie said, and Becca called me to the phone to translate “Wulp” and “bare naked.” “Bare naked” was easily interpreted, but “wulp” presented a challenge. The best I could do was explain that Willie meant “well” and sometimes hearing people use that word to begin relating a thought. A few months later I noticed Becca fingerspelling “well” during signed conversations. She also incorporated this into written sentences.

Lindsay and Becca eventually used the phone and the TTY like other girls.
their age. They ordered pepperoni pizza and even made an occasional prank call. The TTY has been a wonderful tool. It provides young deaf children with a meaningful way to learn the power of the printed word. It’s definitely something our family could not have lived without.

Six Years Later

Becca Still Lets Her Fingers Do the Talking

It’s been six years since I wrote “Calling Up Literacy” and Rebecca, as she now prefers to be called, is seventeen years old. As I recently reread the article, I thought of how we have continued to use the TTY and how electronic print has afforded her so many opportunities to practice reading and writing for very real purposes.

Besides using it to connect with friends or to call me at work to tattle on her big sister, Sarah, Rebecca has used the TTY increasingly as her connection to the world in general. Beginning at age twelve, when she used the relay service to call the veterinarian to determine if her pet lizard was “really dead” and not just hibernating, the TTY has provided her with a means of navigating the world through print.

Recently, I got a call at work from Rebecca. She said she had been shopping and found the snow boarding pants she wanted on sale. The clerk at the store told her they were going fast, so she asked me to stop on the way home from work and pick up a pair for her. At the store, I surveyed the available choices and used my cell phone and the relay service to call Rebecca and describe them. When I got home, she determined that the purchased pair were the perfect color (they match those of her boyfriend), fit, and price for her limited budget. Oh, the power of the wireless word!

Over the years we have also added other technology aids. We found that caller ID is a great accessory for a deaf/hearing family. When the phone rings it flashes, but it also displays the caller’s identity. With caller ID, Rebecca also knows the identity of the caller. A headset added to our “hearing” phone has also proved helpful by making our hands free when we have need to interpret or sign during phone calls.

We also recently discovered wireless communication through two-way alphanumeric pagers. We were lucky enough to find a used pager and service in our area at a reasonable price. Rebecca uses the pager to send and receive messages from voice and TTY phones and through e-mail. Pager communication provides a new challenge for us. Where we previously encouraged Rebecca to expand her language, with the pager we try to condense communication to only the most vital information. I can foresee that this may prove interesting when we page Rebecca to remind her of her curfew and she tries to negotiate a later hour.

Her years of experience using the TTY helped Rebecca smoothly switch lanes onto the digital information highway. The Internet has become her preferred mode of electronic communication. While attending our state’s school for the deaf and she has developed friendships with other deaf teens throughout the state. On weekends and holidays she stays in touch with her school friends by visiting on-line. She also uses the Internet for school projects, shopping, travel, and entertainment information.

The new technology and the TTY provide a medium to use literacy skills to access the world and to gain some very valuable growing-up experiences.

Reference


The first part of this article was printed originally in the 1994 fall issue of Talking Points: Conversations in the Whole Language Community (6, 2). It is used with permission.

Bonnie M. Neeley, mother of Rebecca Neeley, lives on Bainbridge Island, Washington.